

“Miss Ellie” helps celebrate Women’s History Month at Arsenal

by Rachel Newton

In recognition of National Women’s History Month, the Bluff Center Chapter of Federally Employed Women (FEW) and the Federal Women’s Program (FWP) at Pine Bluff Arsenal and the National Center for Toxicological Research (NCTR) hosted a luncheon and educational program by Ellen DiMaggio (“Miss Ellie”) titled “From Corsets to Congress” at the PBA Training Center.

“Women have contributed a lot to the history of our nation,” said Maxine Miller, FWP manager, during the program. “They continue to make great contributions at a great rate of speed. We are seeing many changes.”

During her introduction of DiMaggio, Miller said that there was one thing on her bio that she really liked. “The part I liked was where she said she was from New Jersey,” she said. “She said she wasn’t born in the south but she got here as fast as she could.”

As the lights in the room dimmed for the presentation, DiMaggio came out dressed in period clothing shouting – “Educate your daughters.”

DiMaggio, from Lake Village, Ark., said that in 1861 at the start of the Civil War, women had very specific roles in what they were and weren’t allowed to do. “We didn’t go to school,” she said. “We weren’t allowed to be educated. When the war was over, there was a big push to get our daughters out there and educate us.”

Stepping back in time, DiMaggio highlighted several women during the program who played a role in our nation’s history and what life was like for a women living during the time period of 1865 to 1890. “Society is based upon women’s place,” she said, quoting phrase from the 1800s. “We found a big emptiness in American society caused by the Civil War – that emptiness was men. This created a lot of empty classrooms across the nation creating a real economic burden. There were all these girls sitting home doing nothing. Let us open our doors to the women. Thus, since about the mid-1860s, educational opportunities for women have been open.”

Another change during this time was the dress reform, according to DiMaggio. “Think about your traditional southern belle with her great big hoop dresses. Can’t sit down. Can’t cook. Can’t go shopping. All the women could do in those dresses was sit around and look pretty. Much to the delight of their husbands,” she said. “A lady by the name of Elizabeth Smith Miller came up with what is called a bloomers dress during 1851 and re-emerged in the 1890s with the invention of the bicycle.”

DiMaggio said that Miller found that by wearing this type of dress she could go upstairs with a lantern and carry a child without the fear of tripping. “In that time period, there was a lady by the name of Amelia Bloomer, who was an editor of a women’s magazine, and she talked quite often about these wonderful outfits that Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s cousin had designed, hence the name the ‘Bloomer’s Dress’.”

With the education and the change of dress, DiMaggio said that women then started to get involved in many professions.

“Dr. Mary Edwards Walker was a wonderful surgeon,” she said. “But, because she was a woman no one would come to see her. She had an office but no one would even talk to her after all she was a girl. So, she dressed as a gentleman and she went off to work during the Civil War as a surgeon in the Army. The military would not allow her to operate. However, during a battle at Gettysburg, the Confederate Army was really in need of doctors and they allowed her to be a surgeon. Eventually, she was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.”

Other women that DiMaggio talked about during the presentation was Mary Ann Shadd, who was an advocate of immigration to Canada, the first black woman editor of a newspaper in the United States, and received a law degree at 60-years of age; Sarah Hale wrote the poem “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and was also the editor of “Godey’s Ladies Book” – which is equivalent to today’s “Vogue” magazine; Vinnie Ream sculpted the marble statue of Abraham Lincoln at the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C.; and Maggie Lena Walker was the first woman to become a U.S. bank president and founded the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank.

DiMaggio, who is a member of the National Women's History Project, Arkansas Arts on Tour, the Mid-America Arts Alliance and the Society of Women and the Civil War, offers a wide variety of programs during her educational performances including women's roles during the Civil War, the 19th century wardrobe and a program on the hardships women faced in Arkansas during war time.

The program concluded with a FEW business meeting.